

PREPARING FOR A COMPETITION



Preparing for a Competitions

1. Why Compete?

2. Preparation

- a) Base Preparation
- b) Peaking
- c) Pre-Competition
- d) The Big Day

3. What To Expect

4. Etiquette

5. Post Competition Evaluation

1. Why Compete?

Competition offers excitement, challenge and reward. It provides a platform from which to display your skills and also motivation to train and improve. Without a doubt the best athletes in ballroom and latin are always the competitors, they are the elite.

A friendly competitive environment stimulates motivation and provides inspiration through providing elite role models. Competitions can also act as a benchmark to indicate how you are improving in general and over time against your opponents. You can feel for yourself if you are improving but it is nice to have that feeling confirmed by a panel of professional adjudicators.

Above all competitions provide comradeship and support. You tend to see the same old faces again and again no matter where you travel and over time you become friendly. While competitors are very competitive the majority are also very social. You make alliances and bonds with 'brothers in arms' that span cities and generations.

2. Preparation

The key to success at a competition is preparation. There are ***phases of preparation***; Base Preparation, Peaking, Pre-Competition and 'Big Day'.

Preparation is not just about dance practice, preparation can include dance tuition, dance practice, physical training, nutrition and mental conditioning. Note that dance tuition and dance practice are listed separately. It is not wise to carry on learning new steps before a competition, concentrate on technique with your teacher and on dance practice.

Physical training and nutrition are covered in two other articles, one detailing a basic guide and the other a more advanced training program. Mental conditioning sounds a little bit 'holistic' but can reap massive rewards for any athlete. Mental conditioning is essentially about using techniques such as visualisation to improve your mental state and performance.

PREPARING FOR A COMPETITION



a) Base Preparation

Base Preparation is the 'every day' training program you follow to improve your dancing. How much or little base training you do depends upon your financial circumstances, personal commitments, health and a variety of other factors. The key elements of base preparation are that it is maintainable, consistent and geared for mid to long term benefit.

Base Preparation is where you can try out new steps, alter the choreography of your routines and experiment with new timings and rhythms. The goal is not to maintain a level of 'competition readiness' but to invest time and effort in the development of your dancing.

Base Preparation is characterised by practicing 'bits & pieces' of routines to perfect them.

A typical Base Preparation week:

Item	Frequency	Duration	Comments
Dance Tuition	1	1 hr	Get as many lessons as you can afford and that you have time to 'dance in' before your next lesson.
Dance Practice	4	1.5 - 2 hr	Work on certain elements, experiment, and don't just go through the routines.
Physical Training	2-3	1 - 1.5 hr	Strength and endurance training, weight resistance and aerobic. Aim to build and maintain a good standard of strength, flexibility and aerobic capacity.
Diet	N/A	N/A	Good healthy eating. Diet contains 65% Complex Carbohydrate, 25% Protein and 10% Fat. Drink plenty of water aim for 1.5-2 litres a day! Sounds a lot but water dehydration is THE biggest limiting factor in performance. All clinical studies show 2 litres a day is the desired amount of fluid to drink.
Mental Conditioning	N/A	N/A	Visualise. Find a couple whose dancing you really admire and who you would like to be as good as. Imagine yourself on stage that good. Focus on it, go through the actions and dances in your mind. Try and feel the muscles in your legs moving. Imagine the best you know and dare to dream, nobody ever broke reality by being realistic.

b) Peaking

Peaking is the stage in your training where you shift your attention from mid and long-term benefits to the short term and start to gear up for competition. We typically start peaking phase 2-3 weeks before the big competition date.

PREPARING FOR A COMPETITION



During Peaking, focus in lessons will be on technique and presentation. New figures and steps are out unless there is a real emergency because something does not work. At this point try to get the routines look slicker and tidier.

Your practice sessions will also shift focus to dancing routines rather than figures. We want to be able to dance each routine without having to think about it. We may also make minor adjustments in angles and transitions from one figure to another. We want to know exactly where the routines will take us from each part of the room and be able to change direction should the circumstances dictate.

Practices are shorter because the intensity is higher, dances are practiced at full speed and in competition mode. Sometimes we will do the 'Five straight', 5 straight dances one after another to simulate the competition.

Physical training is also different, workouts are shorter and of higher intensity. Aerobics are performed at 85-90% of Maximal Heart Rate (MHR) to simulate competition conditions and extend anaerobic capacity. Resistance training is faster and with higher repetitions. Emphasis is on speed and endurance.

c) Pre-Competition

The Pre-Competition stage typically starts 1 to 2 days before the competition, it is typically the day before the battle commences.

Over the Peaking phase your body has been taking quite a pounding, your body needs time to rest and recover. How you spend the day before a competition can have quite noticeable effects on your physical performance. Use this time to allow your body to rebuild stores of glycogen and water, two essential elements in producing and sustaining energy. The next couple of paragraphs will explain glycogen and the how your body creates and stores energy.

Glycogen is your bodies preferred choice of fuel for intense exercise over a short period. Your body manufactures it from the food you eat and so the better quality raw materials you give it the more likely you are able to build and maintain a decent glycogen level. Complex carbohydrates such as rice, potatoes and pasta are ideal raw materials. Glycogens can be thought of as the 'high octane' of body fuels. Glycogen is used up very quickly in the body and so the body also relies on other energy sources such as carbohydrates and fat.

Carbohydrates are the main and preferred energy source over prolonged periods of exercise. There are three main types of carbohydrate; complex carbohydrates (rice, potatoes etc.), simple carbohydrates (sugar's) and fructose. (a sugar that comes from fruit).

Complex carbohydrates take longer to break down and so provide a sustained and controlled energy release. Simple carbohydrates are quick and easy to break down and so produce an energy 'high' followed by an energy crash. This is caused by your bodies blood sugar regulation systems kicking in and pumping insulin into your system to mop up excess blood sugar.

Fructose is a simple carbohydrate that has a sustained energy release making it an ideal energy source for athletes when used correctly. It is quick and easy for the body to break

PREPARING FOR A COMPETITION



down but it still manages to release its energy over a longer period of time and so reducing the high followed by crash effect of sugars.

Fat is used as a fuel source over prolonged periods of moderate activity. The level of intensity of dance competition is generally too high and of too short a duration to utilise fat as a fuel source.

On the day before competition and the morning of competition do eat plenty of complex carbohydrates. At least one, ideally two good rice, pasta or potato meals can really make a difference to how your body performs the next day.

Don't forget to drink plenty of water, at least 2 litres the day before any competition. Carbohydrate is stored 1 part carbohydrate to two parts water. If there is not sufficient water in your system the carbohydrates you eat can not be stored properly. One of the biggest limiting effects on physical performance in fit athletes is dehydration. Even water loss of 5% in your system can have a serious effect on your performance.

Thirst is not a good indicator of hydration, it has been found that thirst does not occur until you are dehydrated to levels that will impact upon your performance. A far more accurate measure of hydration is monitoring your urine. You don't need any special equipment and it is a quick and easy method to use. Simply take note of the colour of your urine when you go to the toilet. If it is Yellow/Green or smells you are dehydrated, if it is clear you are not. The clearer your urine the better. It is impossible to drink 'too much' water as your body will simply flush the excess away along with all the toxins and other impurities in your liver. Switch on to water; you'll also notice a marked improvement in your skin after a couple of days.

Never practice the day before a competition. Preferably rest, get an early night and generally allow your body time to prepare itself to be in peak condition for the competition.

Now is a good time use the visualisation technique to concentrate your performance. Work through the routines and figures in your mind. Think about each step, feel your muscles moving and view yourself from the crowd. Picture yourself receiving the trophy and the crowds' applause. It may help to play the music for each dance. Mental imagery like this is a useful tool and should not be dismissed. Most top athletic coaches are advocates of the visualisation technique.

Often the few days before competition are also spent 'tanning up' to get that just back from the tropics most ballroom and Latin dance competitors have. There is a reason for this and it will be explained under the 'Big Day' phase.

The final thing to do is pack! Pack the day before you go so that you have no worries or hassles on the day. Arrive at a competition feeling calm and collected rather than stressed and harried.

In Conclusion the Pre-Competition phase is about rest and recovery from the exhausting Peaking phase. Eat well, drink lots of water and physically rest. Use visualisation to improve your focus and confidence and to mentally prepare yourself for the next day.

PREPARING FOR A COMPETITION



d) The Big Day

On the big day sleep in if you can. When you get up have a good high carbohydrate breakfast such as cereal (oat porridge is excellent!) and start pottering around.

Most athletes prefer to groom themselves before they arrive at the competition but obviously you don't want to be wearing long eyelashes and heavy foundation if you are travelling for a long distance! **Grooming is important.**

One of the core aspects of competition is getting the judges attention, unfortunately it is human nature to pay more attention to people we find attractive and judges are not infallible. If you are an attractive couple you are more likely to get a judges attention than an unattractive couple, hence the importance of grooming. If you have been following a good Base Training routine you should already be fairly slim and well toned, an excellent place from which to start.

Starting at the top do keep your hair tidy. Ladies usually push their hair back and tie it in a bun; men should also have tidy hair, if the man has long hair try a ponytail. Face should be well made up, ladies usually apply make up differently to how they would normally do it. Bright lights can wash out your features and leave you looking pale and sick. Ladies usually over emphasise features, especially eyes and use much darker and heavier make up than usual. Men have no need to wear make up (although some wear foundation) but should be clean and shaved.

Women usually have much more skin on display in public than they would normally have, especially Latin athletes whose costumes are much shorter and open. Exfoliating the skin using a rough sponge or special cream pays off. If you have been drinking enough water your skin should already be clearer and smoother. A tan is another accessory many couples would not compete without.

Why the tan? A tan makes everybody look healthier and more attractive, thus helping to gain the judges attention and win the support of the crowd. Secondly everybody else has one! Having a tan is a sign of a 'serious' athlete, somebody who takes dancing seriously. If everybody else has a tan and you don't on first impressions you may look as committed as the tanned couple you are on the floor with. It's the same thing with photographers and Nikon camera's, all the pro's use them despite their being equally good camera's from the likes of Minolta.

Moving down to hands and feet, please keep your nails in good condition. Not only do they look make your hands look more attractive but there is a serious safety issue of sharp or jagged nail causing nasty cuts and scratches. Men are often the most guilty of this!

Ladies should have freshly shaved legs if bare.

Finally the last point; do wear a good deodorant as you are going to get awfully hot!

Arrive at the competition at least two hours before your event is due to start to allow the competition organisers time to deal with your entry and so you do not get too stressed about getting ready. Once you are there and registered, check the programme first, feel free to get changed, check out the competitors in your event and warm up.

PREPARING FOR A COMPETITION



3. What To Expect

Most local competitions these days are held in community halls or school gym sort of buildings.

To register for any event you will need a dance association's registration number. You will not be allowed to compete without one of these numbers under Federation of DanceSport South Africa rules. The body in SA, FEDANSA issue the numbers for athletes. You will need to affiliate at the beginning of each year to get this number.

This number is worn on your back and so you must remember to bring a couple of safety pins to attach it! The number is used for adjudicators to identify you on their score sheets. Remember your number and listen out for it, for the remainder of your day that number is your name. Obviously the adjudicators cannot refer to you by name because they probably do not know you personally.

You should now be getting ready to dance, warming up, psyching yourself up and getting a feel for the floor. Every dance floor has different characteristics, they can be hard, springy, dusty, sticky or fast and any combination. It is usual for the organisers to play one or two practice dances before the ballroom and the latin sections of the competitions. Use this time and have a quick practice to get used to the floor and improve your confidence.

For the competition itself the MC will call announce what event is next, if there are less than say 12 couples (depending on the size of the floor) he will not call out the competitors numbers. If more couples have entered the floor that can comfortably and safely fit on to it the competition will be held in 'heats'. The chairman of adjudicators will break the competitors up into 2 or more equal sized groups. If this happens the chairman of adjudicators will call your number or a range of numbers such as 100 to 158. Do listen out for your number because if you miss your round that is you pretty much out!

If there are more than 60 couples in any 1 event the competition will be held in 'rounds'. This means you will dance a round with say 24 couples in the competition split over 2 heats. (You dance once). The judges will then select a total of 12 couples from all of the heats (12 from 24). The remaining 12 couples are then recalled by number so do listen out for it. In the next round 6 couples are selected from 12 to compete in the finals.

It is usual to have other event rounds to be danced between the rounds of a single event in order to give the competitors a rest. For example heat 1 and 2 of round 1 in the Youth Champ Latin may be followed by heat 1 and 2 in round 1 of the Adult Pre-Champ Latin. Do keep an ear out for your event and number.

4. Etiquette

There is a definite code of practice to follow at dance competitions. Recently one dancer who broke etiquette by not wearing a tailcoat in an open amateur championship ballroom event caused an uproar

For the beginner to intermediate the rules of etiquette are quite simple.

- Don't cross the dance floor in the middle of a competition, wait until in between rounds and then walk along the edge of the floor.

PREPARING FOR A COMPETITION



- Talk quietly when the competition is in progress.
- Try not to distract the adjudicators when the competition is in progress.
- Escort the lady on to and off the dance floor by holding her hand high or linking her arm.
- If you collide with another couple apologise, and then start again.
- Don't pour water/oils or any other substance on to the floor to aid your traction.
- Be as polite and helpful and not a nuisance as you possibly can.
- Wear smart clothing, does not have to be competition dress but you must look presentable. Jeans are definitely out! Men can wear shirt and trousers, women a dress or skirt and top.
- If you make it to the final you should shake the presenters hand before accepting the trophy and then wait in line for the other finalists to receive their trophies.

As you advance through the ranks the rules of etiquette get more demanding, for example

- Competition dress is expected
- Athletes tend to arrive at the competition wearing a suit (ladies too)
- Tans are considered normal, people will point out if you are too pale.
- Personal weight control becomes important, adjudicators may comment on it in Dance News or DanceSport Magazines.

6. Post Competition Evaluation

After the presentation of the prizes the adjudicator's score sheet are usually available for analysis. This information details what each adjudicator marked you in each dance and is extremely useful. For example it is possible to find out what the adjudicators think your weakest dance is and take steps to correct it.

Another use for the information might be to use the information strategically. For example in a 4 dance event (Novice or Gold) your closest rival competitor may have won 2 dances and you 2 dances with them having an overall higher score. If there were 7 judges and 6 of them thought they were better in cha-cha and only 4 thought they were better in rumba you know it would be easier to beat them in rumba than in cha-cha. You could then focus on the rumba for the next competition and win 3 dances out of 4 thus winning the competition.

A similar concept is that there is little point focusing on a dance were you are already considered the best at if your other dances are letting you down. If you are already winning a dance in with all 1st places you can't win it anymore! It is also easier to improve your weaker dances than fine tune your best dances. The first 80-90% of a dance is easier to achieve than the last 10%.